

Sexuality and awakening¹

Sexual misconduct is wrong because of the misuse and abuse of our body and those of others. “Misconduct” refers to any transgression by way of any of the bodily parts or openings. In broad terms, it refers to any violation of the person of another (regardless of sex), especially in non-consensual intercourse or sexual exploitation of minors and the vulnerable, such as the rampant child abuse by the Christian church clergy.²

Discourses like **the Sāleyyaka Sutta** (M 41) and **the Sañcetanika Sutta** (A 10.206) specify the kinds of individuals who should not be violated or sexualized in anyway, that is to say, minors, those betrothed to another, wards of the state, those already married, those bound by vows (such as monastics and celibates), and those who do not give their consent.

There are 4 constituents of sexual misconduct:

- (1) a forbidden or unwilling person;
- (2) the mind to enjoy;
- (3) the effort to engage; and
- (4) enjoying the object, or consenting to the union of sexual organs.

Technically, sexual misconduct is said to have occurred when one has a bad intention and does it with a “forbidden” partner or victim: this is merely the “respect for another’s *person*.” However, the essence of the precept against sexual misconduct is that of “respect for another.” In other words, even when our spouse or lover declines to have a relationship, we must respect that refusal. Otherwise, it amounts to breaking this precept of natural morality.³

With **secularism and careerism** rising, even seemingly respectable, amongst Buddhist monastics today, the Buddha’s warning monastics against losing touch with their celibacy and spirituality is most timely. In **the Methuna Sutta** (A 7.47), the Buddha warns monastics against indulging in any kind of sexuality, even indirect or “disguised” sex, such as,

- (1) enjoying being rubbed, massaged, bathed and kneaded by others;
- (2) joking with others, playing with them, jesting with them, especially with women;
- (3) gazing and looking sensuously at others, especially at members of the opposite sex;
- (4) listening to lay people, especially women, as they talk, laugh, sing or weep;
- (5) recalling their own sensual experiences before they became monastics;
- (6) enjoying watching lay people being entertained or serviced with sensual pleasures;
- (7) aspiring to be reborn in the heavens amongst devas. (A 7.47), SD 21.9

The point is clear that monastics – monks or nuns, and celibate renunciants – should abstain from any kind of sex and any kind of sensual pleasures, because these will surely distract them from their practice, weaken their resolve for awakening in this life, and to lose touch with the purpose of the holy life – why they renounced the world in the first place.

¹ This reflection is mostly based on the section on “right action” in **Ariya Atth’āṅgika Magga** (SD 10.16 (4.4-4.5)).

² See **Bad friendship**, SD 64.17 (10).

³ On the definition of sexual misconduct, see **SD 5.7** (2.1) (3). See further **Sexuality**, **SD 31.7**. On natural morality (*pakati sīla*), see **SD 30.8** (8.4.2.2); **SD 37.8** (2); **SD 40a.1** (13.2).

Those who habitually follow the wrong path – practising wrong view, wrong thought, wrong speech, and wrong action – are described in **the Sāmsappanīya Pariyāya Sutta** (A 10.205) in bestial terms, as “crawlers,” thus:

He crawls with his body; he crawls with his speech; he crawls with his mind ... his destiny is crooked; his rebirth is crooked ... either of two destinies, that is, utter suffering in hell or in an animal womb as those that crawl ... Such indeed it is, bhikshus, a being’s rebirth is due to the being [to his past].⁴

For monastics to indulge in such conduct, the wrong and bad karma is not only in the acts themselves, but also in their false pretences and brazen display of goodness and holiness when they are not recluses at all.

In **the Pahārāda Sutta**, the Buddha, in his famous parable of the great ocean, declares:

Pahārāda, just as the great ocean does not associate with the dead ... [it] would quickly carry it to shore, wash it onto the land – so, too, Pahārāda, the sangha does not associate with a person who is immoral, of bad character, of impure and suspicious conduct, secretive in deeds, not a recluse but pretending to be one, incelibate but pretending to be celibate,⁵ rotten to the core, lustful and filthy by nature – the sangha communes⁶ not with such a one, but having quickly assembled, it expels him. Even though he sits in the midst of the sangha, yet he is far away from the sangha, and the sangha is far away from him.⁷

Sensual pleasures and sexuality are closely associated with lay people – those of the world. The very nature of sensual pleasure is rooted in a fixation with the physical body, and the very nature of sexuality is the procreation of the physical body. Our whole species is rooted and thrives in the sexual act, so that sex is the “most selfish” of human acts⁸ and very “time-consuming.”

The (Devatā) Samiddhi Sutta (S 1.20) records how the young monk Samiddhi admonishes a female deity who is in love with him on the fleeting nature of worldly life:

“For, avuso, the Blessed One has declared that **sense-pleasures are time-consuming, full of suffering, full of despair, and great is the danger therein**, while this Dharma is visible right here, immediate, inviting us to come and see, accessible, to be personally known by the wise.”⁹

⁴ A 10.205 ([SD 39.7](#)).

⁵ Or, “Not living the holy life (*brahma, cariya*), but pretending to do so.”

⁶ “Communes” (v) or “to be in communion” (*samvasati*). Technically (according to Vinaya), he is not part of the monastic community: *samvāsa* is defined at V 4:315; *samvasati* at V 4:138, 214. See also Pāc 69 (V 4:137). On community, see [SD 45.18](#) (2.3.5).

⁷ A 8.19,13.1-2 ([SD 45.18](#)). See also **Satta Jaṭila Sutta** (S 3.11,14), on the difficulty of recognizing such false recluses ([SD 14.11](#)).

⁸ [SD 31.7](#) (6.2) & [SD 32.2](#) (3.1.3).

⁹ **(Devatā) Samiddhi Sutta** (S 1.20,5), [SD 21.4](#). In **(Sandiṭṭhika) Sambahula Sutta** (S 4.21), Māra (in the form of a venerable brahmin) offers a similar advice to a group of young monks (to enjoy their youth before the spiritual life), they reply in identical words as Samiddhi’s (S 4.21), SD 103.7.

The Mahā Saccaka Sutta (M 36) recounts the most important realization and decision of the Bodhisattva Gotama that have changed the course of our religious history. The Bodhisattva actually realizes, not one, but *two* vital truths:

- (1) the first realization is that neither sensual indulgence nor self-mortification brings awakening.

Avoiding these two extremes, he realizes that there is a “middle way,” and this is rooted in his second realization:

- (2) how he enjoyed the 1st dhyana¹⁰ when he was still very young, probably only 7 years old;¹¹ of this momentous and beautiful experience, he declares,

‘I fear not the pleasure that has nothing to do with sensual desires and unwholesome states!’

It is the Bodhisattva’s conclusion that dhyana is a pleasure “not to be feared,” which leads to his subsequent meditation and full awakening.¹²

Despite the lay life being rooted in sensual pleasures and sexuality, it is still possible for those who indulge themselves in sensuality (*kāma, bhogī*) to live the spiritual life. This idea of lay spirituality is possible when we understand the difference between “enjoying” and “indulging” in such pleasures and sexuality.

Essentially, when such laity, moderated by the spirit of the 5 precepts, “**enjoy**” worldly pleasures, *they know when to stop* and are able to practise self-restraint when they need to. To “**indulge**” in such worldly pleasures means (1) that we are never really satisfied with them, and keep on desiring more, simply because we do not really know how to enjoy them; and (2) we have taken the vow of celibacy (as monastics, renunciants and observants) but continue, as such, to break the celibacy precept. To say the least, we have been untrue to ourself, and become a “thief” in the teaching.¹³ Our destiny, for such wrong views, is surely either the darkness of the animal world or the violence of the hell states.

The key reason for the happiness of the lay practitioners who engage in sensuality – the *kāma, bhogī* – and yet are able to live the holy life and taste its fruits, is because they constantly reflect on impermanence. When we understand that our body and sensuality are both impermanent, changing and becoming otherwise, we can also understand how they bring us suffering and that they have no essence of any kind.

Hence, rightly enjoying sensuality in this way – guided by the 5 precepts – we are still able to live for streamwinning, and attain it in this life itself. The attaining of streamwinning, or perhaps, once-returning, empowers us to have more self-restraint and spiritual strength to accept

¹⁰ On the significance of the Bodhisattva’s “1st dhyana,” see [SD 49.4](#) (6.2).

¹¹ See **Mahā Saccaka S** (M 36,31), [SD 49.4](#).

¹² See **Mahā Saccaka S** (M 36,31-32), [SD 49.4](#).

¹³ On a renunciant as “thief” in the teaching, see **Arahatta Susīma Sutta** (S 12.70,58), [SD 16.8](#).

ourselves as we age and lose the faculty for enjoying such sensuality, so that we willingly and ably, readily and happily, turn to “progressively higher distinction.”¹⁴

R470 Revisioning Buddhism 165

[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

Copyright by Piya Tan ©2016

¹⁴ *Ulāraṃ pubbenāparaṃ visesaṃ*. This refers to attaining the path, in this life itself, of at least streamwinning. See **Dhamma, cetiya Sutta** (M 89,12 + 18) SD 64.10; **Bhikkhuṇī Vāsaka Sutta** (S 47.10,5), [SD 24.2](#) & **Ānāpāna, sati Sutta** (M 118,2+6), [SD 7.13](#).